Sketch

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Sampler

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SAMPLER

Snips and snails and puppy dog's tails. She knows what I am made of. A dish in three pieces, sharp and clean as proverbs. Thick black smudge on the tea towel, and everything always ruined. "Snips and snails and puppy dog's tails, young man," Mother says, "Why didn't I have a girl?"

I don't answer her. Little boys, you know, are made of only the very hardest stuff. Bawling cats in birch trees. Heel marks on the wallpaper. She knows what it's made of.

I know what it's for.

Tina's papa owns a body shop next to the French Way dry-cleaner's on Ninth Street. The high school boys paint on the side of the garage, "Class of...," every year, and Tina's papa scrubs it off, year after year. He doesn't mind. Lincoln High School Booster Club stickers line up his front window like ammunition.

Tina's papa keeps junked cars in the back lot. Sometimes people tow them there, with hubcaps gone, windshields smashed in spider webs. Some people simply abandon cars there, like half-forgotten sweethearts. One day a man drove up in an old Pontiac. It sounded like death. He got out, shut the door and walked on down the street, thumb out. Stepping lightly.

The car, still warm. Silent.

Tina's papa gives those cars he can't sell for parts to the high school. They paint clever sayings and the latest slang on them, then the Junior Kiwanis Club has a car smash to raise money for — I don't know. New bases for the softball diamond. Pay a dollar, feel the crunch of metal. "Hot Rod." Smash. "Oh! Ma!" Smash.

Tina and I are friends. She is the only girl in the fourth grade who plays Kaiser soccer at recess. She is brown and hard and sure of herself. When she kicks the ball, she laughs.

After school we go to Westphal's Pharmacy and hang off the slick maroon stools. She always orders a green river, and drinks it very fast. She bites clean through the straw. Then we run across the street to visit her papa at the shop; he lifts her right up like fathers do.

Tina and I go 'round back to see the dead cars. Some of the cars are blue in layers, like the sky stacked with clouds. Some have no color at all. We see the memory.

"That's mine, boy," Tina points at the red Falcon with four flat tires. "I'd really go

places in it."

"I like the green one, the one with the windshield." Tina and I make racecar noises at each other. "I'll go so fast I'll be in Hollywood by dark."

"You wish." She leans to pick the scabs on her knees. "My brother got hisself a car so's he can take Coralie Hull to the movies. Oh! Coralie!" Tina does a frenzied imitation of her brother and Coralie, the cheerleader.

"You'll do it, too."

Tina turns. Fast. "Do what?"

I take a step back. Fast. "You know. Play kissy face with some boy at the movies."

"Will not."

"All girls do that."

"Well not me!" Tina runs toward the garage, hair flying like a flag.

"You think you're so smart, Tina Rois!" My voice stabs. I know I'm right. "That's how girls are."

She turns to face me. The twenty-four hour towing sign over her shoulder. She says "You wish."

And I do.

I am going gray. It is graying all over.

"Bruna, Jack's here." The crowd of girls unzips to let me through. They giggle and jingle their bracelets. This is the way we act around lovers.

The cheerleaders sell spirit ribbons in the hall by the shop during lunch. They move in nervous, flitting bunches. They laugh suddenly; stop before they seem to have started; how do they keep their hair so smooth? They smell like something new. Something that hasn't started yet.

Bruna smell like heaven to me; she pins a spirit ribbon on my shirt. Her hand rests on my chest. "Freeze Out the Polar Bears for Homecoming."

Bruna and I are a thing, an item; we're one of those couples you see pressed up against the senior lockers during passing time. When she sells her ribbons she leans so far over the table her skirt rides up her leg, and I have gotten brave enough to look. "Thank-you," she tells them. "Are you going to the game?"

When she sees me coming, she moves out from behind the table piled high with ribbons. We kiss. Can she feel the buttons of my shirt through her sweater? If I had the words I would tell her how she feels against me. But Bruna isn't interested in talking.

We will be married. Bruna holds my arm a little tighter when she thinks of it. We have our fantasy. Bruna all lit up from behind like a greeting card, children sweet as straw, and me, the man of the house... I can't see much beyond that.

"Hi," I say. We glance at the people around us. We know they are looking. We want them to. "See here, this is what love looks like." We know they want to be us. Everyone will use their first star wishes on us tonight.

"Hi," Bruna says. "Are you going to the game?"

There was a time when I wrote poems for lovers.

We aren't alone long. It goes this way. First, a blur of white and relatives. Then those sweet months, with Bruna soft as a favorite dream and the radio on into the night.

Then we find out it has happened.

All the cream soda and the acorn squash, deer sausage swimming in butter at the center. "I can't keep anything down." Grandma says, "Look how she carries it. A girl, a girl." Bruna grows round as a kettle, and I am kept down. The night it ends, Bruna at the mirror, "Something has to happen soon."

So it did, and the two made one are three now. Bruna seems to clean more; always poised to attack with chamois and Spic and Span. She makes things, these incredibly delicate baby things I could unravel with a touch. Her hands vanish to the wrists in pink; fingers fly. Needle pulls through cloth, and she pulls me along with it.

"Not now," she says, "Ro-jean. I think I hear her crying." Bruna throws off the covers and goes to our daughter. The lamp hits the wall. What am I here for?

Yesterday Bruna put up a poster on the bathroom door. It's that popular saying about what to do with something if you love it very much, and I disagree with it completely.

The night Ro-jean is born the moon rocks in the sky. I drink a fifth of Ten High, my mouth dry as the Host at Communion.

I am in love with the Spanish lady on the cottage cheese carton. She smiles at me from behind her fan, because she loves me too. I stare at her all through dinner; she makes me forget my manners; I don't care. That's what love is. My Spanish lady wears long, heavy earrings. And when we dance, as señoritas and those that love them will do, her earrings fall against her neck and sparkle, brilliantly blue.

"Jack-Jack," Mother says, "elbows off the table. Pronto!"

Let me tell you where I am now, though. It is my mother's room; dust in planks of light falling on the bedspread. Perfume bottles half empty, some she only tried once, then left to go bitter in the dust and sunlight.

Mother worked nights at Ilene's Elbow Room. "Where the elite meet to eat," the lady on the radio says. Mother's uniform is draped over the dressing table chair carelessly, like husbands' arms across their wives' shoulders.

On the dressing table, Mother has a jewelry box given to her long ago by her first husband. I have seen him in a photograph, once and quickly. He had an Indian smile.

The jewelry box is silver on tiny lion paw legs. Inside, blue velvet is matted through to the lining. When the lid is raised, the box plays "Home on the Range."

The jewelry box plays its cowboy song so softly she can't possibly hear me.

I only want to feel it. I only want to know; does it feel like clouds against your neck? Is it like Christmas presents on your ears? They don't hurt at all, not really,

what price beauty, as she always says... Mother's earrings, heavy on my neck, sparkle, brilliantly blue. Just like my own Spanish lady.

But now Mother's here.

"Jack, little boys do *not*."

Her hand, long piano player fingers, coming up —

"I *never* want to catch you."

Hair all over her forehead, mouth open —

"Young man, are you *listening* to me?"

Are you listening to me?

The textbooks agree; a man prefers a stronger touch.

Ro-jean sways on my arm. "I want to go out and talk and have a drink like two grown-ups," she'd said, so here we stand. A college bar. Pastel boys and girls sipping drinks, milling in artistic little clots, looking at everything but each other. The boys look for something warm. I still don't know what girls look for.

But my daughter is in her element. She seems to grow taller at my side as she scans the crowd, a mass of school colors, the school mascot in threatening athletic poses. GO STATE above the bar.

"Daddy," she says, "grab that table over there and I'll get us a pitcher."

My daughter used to have the eyes of a child in a rose garden. Now she is more real than the chair at my back; she is like bread and butter, wholly practical. When she returns, she pours the beer, first mine, then hers. "Have you talked to Mom?"

Her mother and I are no longer together. Bruna looks me in the eye now. She calls me "kid."

"She's fine," I say. Ro-jean nods briskly. She seems to harbor no childish fantasies of her mother and I reuniting, no dreams, in fact, at all. I guess dreams are for me.

"She thinks I'm up here drinking every night. Tell her that I study. Get her off my back." Ro-jean serves me. The beer, in a graceful arc, breaks and slides into the glass without a sound.

Who presses hard against my daughter? What ribbons does she sell to them?

"Good Lovin'" by the Rascals pounds out over the dance floor; the couples draw away from each other, confused, then slip off the dance floor like a magician's scarf.

Who taught her to pour the beer just so? What is she made of?

Ro-jean fights against sleep so. She gave up her nap over a year ago, and now she sits beside us in the evenings, rigid in her pajamas, eyes dark with fear. "Bad dark," she cries.

Jumbly, our old, tired collie, made a mess in the basement again last night. Bruna is on her knees with a bucket and bottle and cloth. Jumbly stares after her.

"I don't know, Jack," she says. "I think it's about time to put the old girl down."

Sending Jumbly to the bad dark.

When the old girl is put down, does the new girl come in her place?

Pat and I have been together for three years now. She makes me eat my vegetables

steamed. She throws out the magazine before their covers tear off. Ro-jean approves with the hearty zeal of some camp counselor; she calls and yells her blessings long distance. "You need a woman."

My daughter says she knows what I need. Pat seems to think so, too, and I am content to let her lay out my clothes and fuss about cholesterol. It's not like Bruna and I; first star wishes are wasted on us, but it's good. It's good.

Pat works every Thursday night at the local phone crisis line. She talks to sad insomniacs that hang onto the phone as if to make love through the wires. Pat huddles in the basement of the Old Presbyterian church, waiting for the calls to come in. And they do come in.

"You can't know how it feels." We drive past Boone's Book and Bible. U.S.A. Wigs. Colosimo's Maid Rite. "The last thing he says to me before he hangs up, he goes, 'I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do.' Can you imagine?" Pat, on the seat beside me, stares into each streetlight as we pass.

"Yeah."

"Yeah?" she says. "Yeah? Don't you see? The man was at the end of his emotional rope. He didn't know... what... to do. See?"

I reach for her hand, that stupid, fingers laced together thing you do over the front seat. "Don't you ever feel that way, sweetie?"

"Absolutely not." Pat takes her hand away. The weeping willows through the windshield are the fingers of fortune tellers.

Pat. If I called you, would you listen then?

When I wake up Pat is at the window, and I get out of bed and I go to her. There is no air from the window to move us.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

She says, "The moon is in a sling."

We've all been moon-slung; pitched over the edge and down. Do you think, do you suppose it was stitched across the sky from the start?

Did you say you know what it's all for?